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Chapter 1

Taree (*tah-ree-EH*) hardly noticed the sound of the water as it traveled through the pipes behind her; it had become a natural part of her early routine, bringing a musical rhythm into her essence as she sat curled against the wall under the golden piano. Here she could soak in the calmness around her and gather the strength to again venture out into the elementary school's world that had defied her existence.

By age three, Taree had learned to accommodate those around her. She now easily displayed a proficiency in working near others without becoming a nuisance. Her eyes had long since lost the

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glow of curiosity and interest; she studied and learned only to avoid the punishments of allowing her grades to drop below perfection. The best answers were the ones that required little thought—just listen to the opinions and facts, mindlessly accepting them, and reiterate them onto the paper. She knew little else was required of her: just change the wording enough so that the sentences would relay the answers while seeming to be her own expressions.

The teachers loved her. She had become a model student. Often they would make the mistake of comparing the other children to her, asking each child why he or she could not be more like her. This, of course, resulted in bullying on the playground and a

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profound shyness that left Taree friendless and afraid.

And this solitude had no reprieve. At home she was little more than an inconvenience. Expectations ruled here, as well: she followed a strict, predefined regimen. This schedule could only be varied if education demanded it.

Otherwise, she knew what she had to do.

Today would begin the fifth grade. Apprehension gripped her as she recalled her parents' warning: two teachers would share her this year to prepare her for the middle school's practice of subject teachers rather than the general practitioner style that had so far applied. One class would be taught by a second teacher who would hold that class in his or her room. The classes

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would walk quietly down the hall, exchanging teachers, just as if they were heading out for recess or walking to the cafeteria for lunch.

Taree peeled herself off from the wall and crawled out from under her shelter. It was time to eat her breakfast, pack her lunch, grab her backpack, and then head down the path that would lead her to school. As she stood, she unconsciously shook herself: in silence, the well-trained horse seemed to rebel against the rider. Instead, with resolve, she headed down the stairs to begin her day.

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Chapter 2

The walk to school proved to be surprisingly uneventful. It seemed that, even with the new protocol, parents or guardians were driving their children to school on this first day.

For a moment, Taree allowed a deep sorrow to rise within her. For as long as she could remember, she had carried the smile of a mysterious woman within her memories. She did not know this person, so far as she knew. Yet the smile carried a warmth and security that Taree longed to feel. She thought of her parents, dignified and relentless, and the smile once again vanished from her mind. Steeling herself, she entered the

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classroom that was now to be referred to as a homeroom.

As she headed toward the desks, she realized that the surfaces no longer held evidence that they had been assigned. Prior to this year the teachers had seated the students, alphabetically. Since she appeared to be the first student to arrive, she quietly approached the teacher's desk.

"Excuse me, Sir," she managed. Previously her teachers had always been women; this difference made her nervous. Mr. Doyle raised his eyes.

"Oh, hello there, I didn't hear you come in," he acknowledged. "How can I help you?"

Taree took out the class schedule that she had received in the mail. She quietly

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presented the paper as she continued to talk: “Hi,” she responded, cautiously. “I’m Taree Schulz. Is there a particular seat that I should sit in?”

The teacher smiled. “I thought—so long as the class maintains good behavior—that I would allow you students to choose where you would like to sit,” he explained.

Taree thanked him, uneasily. Then, remembering a study skills tactic that she had somewhere picked up, she moved to a desk in the front left of the classroom: *Sit in the front left of the classroom. Here you will have fewer distractions. Also, since the professor writes from left to right, you will be the first to see the notes that he is writing.*

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Because she was lost in thought, she failed to notice that her teacher had continued talking. A dark red spread across her face as another student, who had just entered the room, answered the teacher's question. "I'm sorry, Sir," she stammered. "I didn't realize that you were still talking to me."

The teacher's smile never left his face. "That's okay, Taree. The fifth grade is a new experience for all of you. I am sure that you'll do better during class time."

Taree wanted to sink into the floor. Instead she thanked him and quietly began to set up her desk for the day. The other student, Matthew, plopped down in front of her. Turning, he grimaced, "I'm going to show you up this year." She decided to ignore him.

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Matthew got good grades despite his unruliness in class. For a moment, she contemplated changing seats . . . he had pulled her hair all throughout the first grade when he had been seated behind her. She had consistently put up with his antics. But, with the teacher outside the classroom, Taree had finally raised herself from her seat, turned around, and shoved him. The classroom had exploded in a round of applause as Matthew had flown across the empty desks and seats behind him. He had then threatened to beat her up after school. She remembered how he had run to his bus that very afternoon. The teacher had defended Taree's actions, smugly telling Matthew that obviously Taree had had a

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good reason for doing what she did since *she* was the better student.

Presently, Taree frowned. She was not proud of her past behavior. She quietly responded, "I hope you do."

Matthew looked at a loss for words. The teacher continued smiling.